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Linux craze sparks high-tech brain drain

The Linux operating system has finally captured the attention of the business world, with the runup this week in Corel's stock price and Red Hat's recent gangbusters initial public offering.

It is causing many business executives to scratch their heads, wondering why a computer operating system that's free can possibly be significant.

Having witnessed a few technological revolutions through the past 20 years, I can say that something big is going on, and all of us would do well to understand it.

If we don't take the time to understand why Linux is "big," we'll probably soon find that we can't hire the technical staff we need. What is happening today might be dubbed the "Linux brain drain."

The best and the brightest technical people throughout the computer community are increasingly focusing their activities on Linux, and are moving away from alternatives such as Windows NT.

The implications are obvious: With a well-publicized shortage of high-tech skills, companies will soon find an even bigger problem in attracting the people they need. Unless, of course, the companies sign on with Linux.

The brain drain is being fuelled by the fact that many within the high-tech community (particularly young people) think Linux is cool, and anything related to Microsoft is not. When it comes to high-tech, cool rules.

Part of Linux's appeal is that it provides people with a way to offset Microsoft's dominance. There are many throughout the Linux community worldwide who are quite passionate in their belief that the future world of computing should not be controlled by one organization. Thus, tens of thousands of brilliant computer geeks are dedicating their time to ensure the world has an alternative.

They are donating their time and skills to the Linux cause through what is known as the "open source" model of computing.

The open source concept is based on the realization that the best software comes not from "closed" programs that are developed and controlled by one company but from the global sharing of skills and knowledge.

With open source, anyone is free to develop, modify and redistribute Linux, providing a degree of flexibility that is simply unparalleled and makes it so appealing to people.

Of course, Linux wouldn't have such a following if it weren't any good. But it is better than good: Linux has a well-earned reputation as an operating system that features rock-solid stability. The Linux community is rife with stories of Linux servers that have worked



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without crashing for months on end under extremely heavy workloads.

Enthusiasts often point out that the same can't be said for other popular operating systems that regularly put up an infamous blue screen when things go wrong.

The stability of Linux comes from the open source model of computing, as well as the fact that its continuing development takes maximum advantage of the Internet. With almost instant global collaboration between its many enthusiasts, the project evolves at a pace that's stunning. If a problem is noticed with a particular component of the software, the issue is

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often analyzed, debated and resolved within a matter of days, if not hours.

Also, the economics of Linux makes sense: You can't argue with free. In my own case, I've had several Linux servers supporting different aspects of my small business for the past year, and know that I have saved several tens of thousands of dollars in hardware and software.

The situation with Linux today is much the same as it was with the Internet in late 1993. Back then, the business world had first begun to hear of the Internet, and was coming to grips with the fact that something big was happening. The smart ones stayed in tune with the Internet's emergence and discovered how to take advantage of it. So too it will be with Linux.

Of course, all of this raises a question: Where is the money to be made? That is a whole other topic that will be explored.

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